This boat don’t float

Dreaming of a Huck Finn-style adventure on the Mississippi, a young couple are instead afoul of the law.

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William Gratz left and Claire Boucher sat on their houseboat at the Minneapolis impound lot on Thursday afternoon. The young college students built their houseboat/ raft with hope of sailing down the Mississippi river to New Orleans. (Jerry Holt/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

Advertisement

Claire Boucher and William Gratz had their sights set on the southern reaches of the Mississippi River when they packed their chickens, a sewing machine and 20 pounds of potatoes into a houseboat they crafted from scratch.

Calling themselves Veruschka and Zelda Xox, river names worthy of the grand adventure they envisioned, the young couple pushed off from the riverbank in north Minneapolis the first week of June.

But their journey ended only a few miles downstream after engine trouble and a three-week tangle with the cops. The Minneapolis park police trailed them from river bank to river bank, as Boucher and Gratz tried to get their boat in working order, often tying up to trees and hopping ashore to gather supplies from Craigslist and hardware stores.

Now their vessel, the "Velvet Glove Cast in Iron," is marooned in the Minneapolis impound lot. The chickens were seized by animal control, and Boucher, 21, and Gratz, 23, have abandoned their hope of reliving the enduring tradition of river lore.

"Even though it's sad this happened, it's still an adventure," Boucher said.

The trouble began, as it often does, with a sudden twist of fate and an encounter with the law.

Boucher, who's from Vancouver, B.C., and Gratz, from Tennessee, met at school in Montreal. The idea for the river journey was hatched last fall. After months of Internet research, they made the 25-hour trip to Bemidji, Minn., where a friend allowed them to build the boat on his property. For more than a month, they toiled over the engineering of the 20-foot boat to make sure it floated. They installed accordion folding doors, glass windows, pink shutters and painted murals in black, white and red paint of fantastical creatures on the sides. Strangers gave them bikes, a mattress and the sewing machine (powered by on-board batteries). They got a copy of Mark Twain's "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," which neither of them had read.

"I always wanted to live on a boat," Boucher said. "We both wanted to go south and live on it when we got to New Orleans."

They hauled it to north Minneapolis and shoved off from land the first week of June. Moments later, their engine began to sputter and gurgle. They made it to the other side of the river and tied the boat to a tree, determined to repair the motor and be on their way again in a few days.

They were awakened one morning by Minneapolis park police officer Rob Mooney tapping the side of their boat with a stick. Mooney gave them until the next Tuesday to gather life jackets, paddles and other supplies, despite a Minneapolis park ordinance forbidding boats from tying up to any tree, shrub or post in a park without a permit. The officer said the couple never told him about their engine trouble.

"I love the idea of the Tom Sawyer adventure," Mooney said. "The problem is it's not 1883. You can't do that anymore. You have to follow the rules."

When Mooney returned a week later and saw Boucher and Gratz's chickens grazing and signs of camping, they were given citations for camping and alcohol consumption in the park and told to move along.

"We were just trying to get our act together so we could get out of the Twin Cities," Gratz said. "We didn't want to float down the river out of control."

The next leg of their journey was much more precarious. After entering the channel without a working motor, they began to drift toward rocks jutting out of the water. Surrounded by caution signs, they frantically pushed away from the danger using sticks. They reached an island north of the Lowry Bridge.

The island seemed to be a haven for canoes and other boats, they said, so they set up camp and made plans to resume their search for a working motor over the next week. Swimming was the only way to reach the river bank, so several times a day they would jump in the water and bring back tools wrapped in plastic bags.

Fate of the journey uncertain

The tranquility of the island didn't last long. This time, the Hennepin County Sheriff Office's water patrol showed up and told all of the boaters to leave by that evening in advance of the Lowry Bridge demolition on Sunday. Another boat towed the Velvet Glove Cast in Iron to Boom Island, where the final showdown would take place.

Mooney said when he spotted the houseboat there, he'd had enough.

"I personally allowed them for a couple weeks to try to solve the problem on their own," he said. "It was clear that they couldn't get it done."

The city loaded the houseboat onto a flatbed trailer and took it away.

On Thursday, Boucher and Gratz took a city bus to the impound lot to retrieve whatever they could carry from the boat. They searched for a jar of wild rice so they could make dinner for the strangers who are letting the couple stay with them for a few nights.

The couple say they can't afford to fix the minor damage from the towing or have the boat hauled back to the river. They're planning to continue their trip south by bus. The chickens can't be

reclaimed without a Minneapolis address and permit, so they will be sent to a chicken farm. Its fate uncertain, the Velvet Glove Cast in Iron rests next to burned-up and smashed car carcasses.

Boucher and Gratz still have a few people rooting for them.

"I would love for them to go," Mooney said. "I hope they do it."

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